



## Justified Jargon: Yet Another New Word for a Serious Reality

*Versatilist*. No, it isn't just the latest in higher education jargon. Noted in The New York Times' columnist Thomas L. Friedman's well-received book, [The World Is Flat](#), and coined by [Gartner, Inc.](#), a technology consulting company, *versatilist* refers to a move away from highly specialized workers to employees who are more agile in changing environments and who possess more breadth as well as depth of knowledge. Building worker versatility and finding workers who are already versatile are the new themes for career planning, according to a Gartner study.

Accepting the obvious, just what do college graduates need to know when they enter the workplace? And, what must they—and incumbent workers with years of experience—continue to learn? Unquestionably, the workplace in all sectors calls for greater *responsiveness*. To that end, higher education and business must forcefully promote the qualities of lifelong learning together—including learning how to learn, solving problems, and adapting well to new situations.



Susan Porter Robinson is Vice President for Lifelong Learning at ACE.

Yet being a *versatilist* is not just about softer skills. While overspecialization can cause tremendous damage to higher education and workforce systems—as [China's Soviet experience continues to attest](#)—a lack of depth puts troublesome burdens on the workplace as well. All workers must possess specific sets of skills and knowledge that their countries and economies require. But, employees today must also be able to work outside individual domains, using interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches that anticipate, prevent, or solve problems. In the aftermath of September 11, the Challenger Shuttle tragedy, and most devastating recently, Hurricane Katrina, we've learned that such employee versatility and collaboration across sectors is critical to preventing and managing disasters. Almost nightly, as a nation, we're told that we're not there yet. The September 11th Commission made that shockingly clear, as have the horrifying pictures of New Orleans and other affected communities along the Gulf Coast and beyond.

Since lifetime employment is no longer a promise, much less a guarantee, leaders in continuing education groups, business, unions, and industry must find ways to provide learners/workers with new muscles that develop from continuous learning opportunities. This kind of learning demands a crucial balancing act between generalist and specialist. If effectively managed, it prepares military servicemembers for life and work after battle; health-care workers for chances to move about a highly diverse career lattice; and MBA graduates for global projects with colleagues as far flung as Berlin, Bangalore, and Beijing. And *should* have prepared leaders and employees in multiple sectors for this unspeakable Southern aftermath.

This fall, at two national conferences (the Association for Continuing Higher Education's annual meeting, [Designing Our Destiny: Creative Responses to Change in Continuing Higher Education](#)) and the Association for Joint Labor/Management Educational Programs' conference, [Workforce Development: Success Is a Choice](#) I will address participants on the driving national and global forces that demand versatility. As we search for strategies to create successful destinies for our learners and the programs that serve them, let's grapple with the balancing act. It's not just jargon; it's critical.

### Related Links

[CenterPoint Insight Archives](#)

[Back](#)